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L.A. council votes to resume major cleanups near shelters



Homeless people pack up their belongings along 1st Street between Broadway and Spring Street in Los Angeles during a cleanup. (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

By EMILY ALPERT REYES | STAFF WRITER

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A vote to resume major cleanups near homeless shelters - Los Angeles Times
#2479

The Los Angeles City Council voted to resume major cleanups around its “bridge housing” shelters, a step sharply opposed by local advocates who argue it will put homeless people at grave risk during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Council members voted 10-4 on Wednesday to bring back “[comprehensive](#)” cleanups in designated zones around the sites. Backers of the decision said it was needed to maintain cleanliness and keep promises that city leaders made to neighbors.

Councilman Bob Blumenfield, who voted for the plan, said that when shelter plans were unveiled, “we made promises to the community that those areas would not become magnets for more encampments and for the buildups of items and trash” — a promise that L.A. needs to keep to reduce future resistance to homeless shelters and housing, he said.

The decision was opposed by Councilmen Mike Bonin, Marqueece Harris-Dawson, David Ryu and Herb Wesson. Ryu said that public health experts have made it “absolutely clear that encampment sweeps during a pandemic are a bad idea.”

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“Moving our unhoused neighbors around while they’re trying to stay safer at home is unsafe for them and unsafe for the community,” Ryu said.

Despite the council vote to authorize the sanitation bureau to resume major cleanups in the shelter zones, Mayor Eric Garcetti said Wednesday evening that “that doesn’t mean that the city has announced we will do this.” The mayor said that a city direction to change its approach would require further consultation with public health officials.

The debate Wednesday was swamped with confusion over what, exactly, the city has been doing to clean up around encampments, how those practices have changed during the pandemic, and how the council decision would affect that. Ahead of the vote, Bonin complained that, “I’m still unclear on what the hell it is that we’re asking to be done.”

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In March, council members [voted](#) to temporarily stop enforcing a law that requires tents to come down during daytime hours. Letting people stay in their tents, they said, would reduce the risk of them being exposed to COVID-19.

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That vote did not halt cleanups, but sanitation officials said that in light of health guidelines issued during the pandemic, the city has held off on “comprehensive” cleanups that require people to move their tents. Such cleanups can take anywhere from two hours to the entire day, one official told council members.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has [recommended](#) to local governments that people who live on the streets be allowed to remain where they are, since “clearing encampments can cause people to disperse throughout the community,” which “increases the potential for infectious disease spread.”

Councilman Joe Buscaino, who put forward the proposal to ramp up cleanups, argued that the city has been misinterpreting such guidance because the comprehensive cleanups require people only to leave temporarily. During the meeting, the councilman displayed photos of large objects and clutter that he said were left behind after “spot cleaning.”

“This is clearly junk, plain and simple,” Buscaino said, arguing that debris could house rats or lead to fires. He later added, “All I’m asking is to simply clean up our streets. Why is that not acceptable?”

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At one point, Buscaino compared the cleanups to street sweeping, which requires people to move their cars so that “effective cleaning” can occur. Another councilman countered that there was a big difference.

“It’s the difference between cars and people,” Bonin said.

Buscaino also attributed the pileup on city streets to an April [court decision](#) that blocks the city from seizing and destroying bulky items such as mattresses based solely on their size. That preliminary injunction still allows such items to be removed in other circumstances, however, such as when they are blocking the sidewalk or threaten public health.

The bridge housing sites are supposed to provide interim shelter for homeless people while they await permanent homes. Among those pushing for the cleanups are Venice residents who have complained about encampments around one site.

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“The trash is overwhelming now. It’s sad and disgusting,” Venice resident and neighborhood council member Soledad Ursua said. “We’re going to end up with the bubonic plague.”

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Another Venice resident, Christina Tullock, said there had been “a lot of broken promises to both the housed and the unhoused” about how the site would operate. Tullock said “things aren’t being managed” as the city had pledged.

Shayla Myers, an attorney with the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, said it was a promise the city never should have made. “It is a waste of resources to do comprehensive cleanups based on these zones, rather than need, in the interest of placating the community,” Myers said.

Many residents and activists phoned into the meeting to oppose the decision, arguing that such cleanups displace and harass homeless people and end up trashing crucial belongings, putting people at greater risk during the pandemic. The existing shelters do not have enough room for all of the unhoused people on nearby streets, they pointed out.

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The goal is to “erase people off the streets at the behest of NIMBYs who can only tolerate small shelters in their neighborhoods if the city can guarantee the remaining unhoused people will be pushed out of sight,” said Miguel Camnitzer of the activist group Street Watch L.A., who lives downtown near one of the shelter sites.

The Echo Park Neighborhood Council also formally opposed the move, arguing that “displacing people who are simply trying to survive nearby and who do not have a bed available to them does nothing to solve the underlying issues and, in fact, actually worsens them.” It also criticized spending on police overtime around bridge housing sites.

L.A. had planned to spend \$8.6 million to ensure round-the-clock policing around the shelter sites, but budget reductions have changed those plans, LAPD Chief Michel Moore said at a news conference this week.

“Frankly the city just simply does not have that money to provide this department” and “we don’t think that’s the best use of overtime,” Moore said.

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Ahead of Wednesday’s vote, Blumenfield sought unsuccessfully to tie resuming comprehensive cleanups to entering the next phase of reopening the economy during the pandemic. That motion failed.

Councilman Mitch O’Farrell, in turn, amended the plan to include a report from city staffers on ensuring that the resumed cleanups include outreach and follow CDC guidelines, which he said would allow homeless people who say they are isolating themselves to avoid COVID-19 to be left alone during cleanups.

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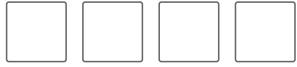
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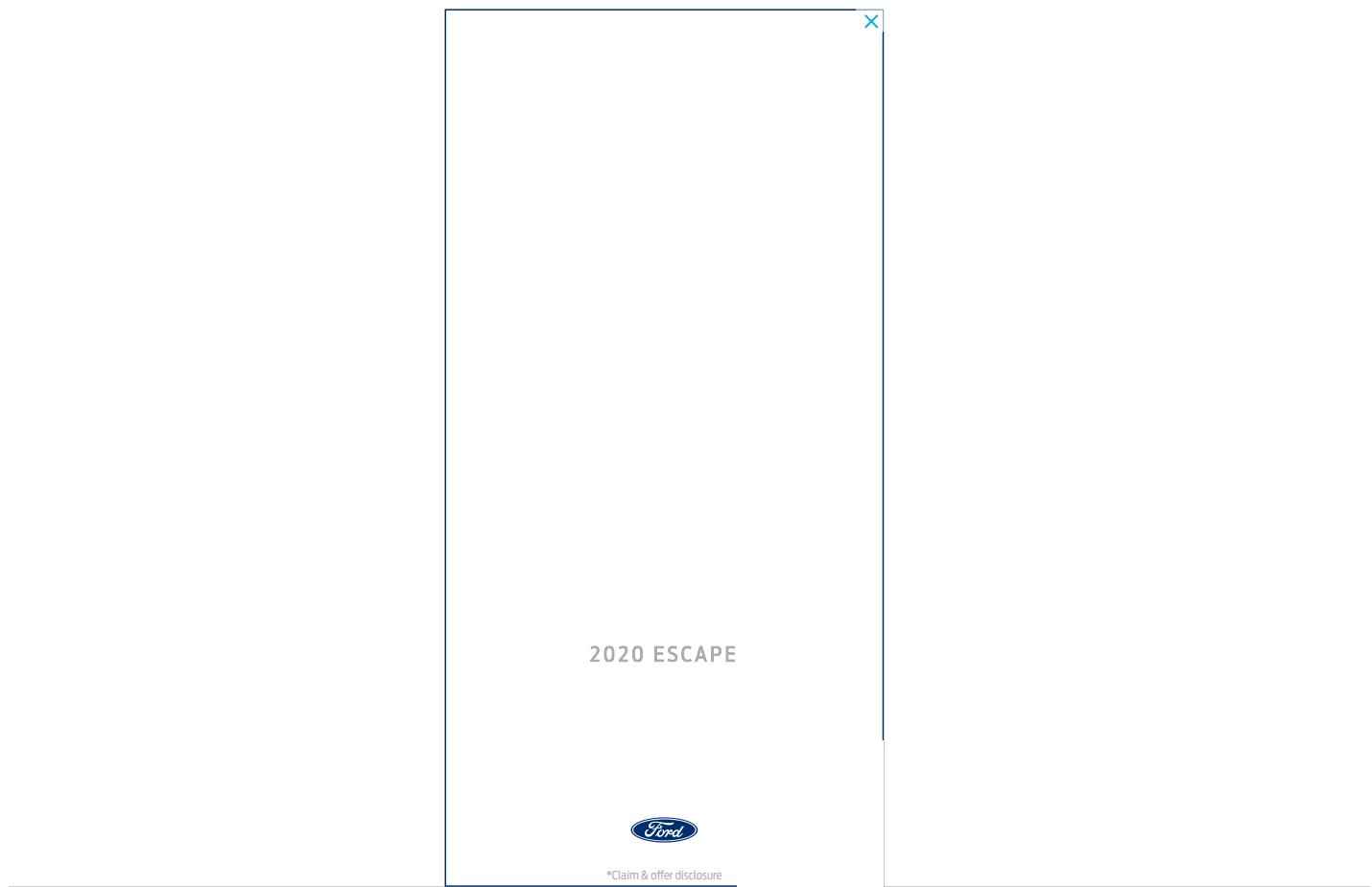
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